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Connecting reminiscence, art making, and cultural heritage: A pilot Art-for-Dementia care programme

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Abstract

Incidence of dementia in Singapore is increasing and strategies to care for people with dementia are necessary. *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* is a pilot participatory visual art programme designed for clients at an Alzheimer's Disease Association (ADA) Singapore day care centre. The programme, which combines reminiscence with art-making, aims at enabling participants to further explore the heritage collection at the Peranakan Museum to reawaken memories and promote personal expression. This study involved eight participants (seven females and one male) all aged 70 years and above, with mild or moderate stage Alzheimer's disease. Video recordings and journal entries were collected to study the effects of the programme on the participants. Data were analysed and interpreted using a grounded theory approach to identify general themes and facilitate focused analyses. The three themes identified in this study that support the benefits of the programme include: (1) fostering space for self-discovery, growth, and socialising; (2) art as a resource for multi-sensorial engagement and stimulation; and (3) encouraging play and boosting morale. Further use and development of the programme is recommended as a strategy to care for and enrich the lives of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Keywords: Visual arts; Alzheimer's disease; Museum; Qualitative data analysis; Reminiscence; Cultural heritage

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Introduction

The prevalence of dementia among Singaporeans over the age of 65 is on the rise. Estimates indicate that 53,000 individuals in Singapore will be living with dementia by 2020, demonstrating noticeable growth from the 22,000 cases reported in 2005 (Alzheimer's Disease International 2014). The impact of dementia is extensive and can lead to poor quality of life. Dementia is an umbrella term that describes an irreversible degenerative brain disease resulting in a loss of cognitive functional ability that affects a person's ability to perform everyday activities (Alzheimer's Association 2015). The disease is characterised by symptoms such as memory loss, impaired judgement, disorientation, and behavioural changes. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia, caused by deterioration of nerves cells in the brain that leads to a loss of memory and other cognitive impairments. The onset of dementia can also greatly reduce social contact and activity (Sands et al. 2004). Isolating circumstances and low levels of activity can adversely affect one's wellbeing. Loneliness, having a lack of purpose, low self-esteem, and depression are issues that challenge those living with dementia (Volkers and Scherder 2011).

However, living does not cease when dementia begins. Contrary to the popular belief that living ceases upon receiving a diagnosis of dementia, researchers have demonstrated and argue that one's quality of life can be maintained while living with dementia (de Medeiros and Basting 2014; Fritsch et al. 2009). As incidences of dementia continue to increase in Singapore, it is appropriate to seek ways create a supportive and inclusive environment that will enable people living with dementia to have access to a good quality of life. Thus, strategies to care for people with dementia will be required to ensure that these individuals continue to have access to an enriched, purposeful, and meaningful life in the community.

Although the arts, generally speaking, is not in a position to cure dementia, a growing body of research shows promising outcomes for people living with dementia who participate in arts activities (Camic et al. 2014; Kinney and Rentz 2005; Capstick 2012; Grant et al.

2012; Hannemann 2006; Eekelaar et al. 2012; Ullán et al. 2013; Ford 2012). Some of the known benefits of engaging in creative art activities include reducing isolation, promoting social inclusion, preventing depression, promoting self-esteem, enhancing caring relationships, and offering cognitive stimulation for people living with dementia. *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* is an art-for-dementia care programme that shares a similar endeavour to promote the well-being of Alzheimer's disease patients.

Programme rationale and goals

Let's Have Tea at the Museum is a pilot participatory visual art programme designed for use by clients at an Alzheimer's Disease Association (ADA) day care centre in Singapore. The programme was developed by Assistant Professor Michael Tan and his team from the School of Art, Design, and Media at Nanyang Technological University in 2014. The project, funded by the National Arts Council of Singapore, aimed to expand the repertoire of activities at ADA day care centres for clients with early or moderate stage Alzheimer's disease. The multi-sensory programme had several objectives: (1) to provide the participants opportunities to explore visual art engagement as a form of leisure activity; (2) to foster new interest and self-discovery; (3) to use the process of making art to engage participants by encouraging verbal communication and imaginative play; (4) to encourage participants to express their ideas and stories based on project themes; (5) to promote socializing through the exchange of stories and creative play with art; and (6) to deepen the participants' engagement with the museum artefacts through art making.

The Peranakan culture is a unique cultural tradition indigenous to Singapore and Southeast Asia that fuses ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian elements in its material legacy and heritage. Drawing upon the participants' familiarity with the visual and material artefacts from the Peranakan culture on display in the museum, *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* enhances ADA's previous museum reminiscence programme at the Peranakan Museum by incorporating art-making to enable the participants to further explore the heritage collection at the Peranakan Museum to reawaken memories and promote expression of ideas. The programme, which lasted for six weeks, involved three creative projects and a museum visitation on the third week. It was held weekly at the participating ADA Dementia Day Care centre. The eight participants (seven females and one male) involved in this study were all 70 years of age above with mild or moderate stage of Alzheimer's disease. The participants had no experience with art-making prior to joining the programme.

An artist with two art assistants conducted the programme. Each art session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The participants had ADA staff or volunteers as companions to assist and support them during each creative session. The programme introduced the participants to two-dimensional and three-dimensional art-making techniques and led them to create art pieces inspired by the artefacts from the Peranakan culture. Project themes included collaging with fabrics, decorative Ting-Kat art (Tiffin Carrier art), and making traditional ‘goodies’ using paper clay. The first art session, *Collage with Fabrics*, involved introducing the participants to collage art using pre-cut batik fabric pieces. The participants had the opportunity to create original collage art pieces on paper and to share the narratives behind their creations. Building upon the concept of collage art-making, the second session, *Decorative Ting-Kat Art*, provided the participants an opportunity to design and personalise ‘Ting Kats’ (local tiffin containers) using pre-cut fabric shapes and decorative embroidery materials, such as beads and sequins. While creating their art, the participants also reminisced about their use and connection with ting-kats during their lives. Session three involved an outing to the Peranakan Museum where trained docents took the participants on a guided tour to view the museum’s collection and engaged them in a discussion on the artefacts from the *Fashion, Food and Feasting* exhibits. Sessions four and five, *Making Traditional ‘Goodies’*, introduced and engaged the participants to create an assortment of ‘kuehs’ (local snacks and cake) using air dry paper clay. The clay pieces were coloured the following week and were assembled in the ting-kats that the participants decorated during session two. Guided by the topic of an afternoon tea, the sessions encouraged verbal communication among the participants by inviting them to recollect and share their personal stories with ‘kuehs’. On the sixth and final session, an art exhibition and a tea party was held at the participating centre for the participants to display their artwork to staff and clients.

Methods

To examine the impact of the programme, video was used to capture participants’ responses during the programme. The unique feature of video lies in its ability to capture visible conduct such as ‘gaze, gesture facial expressions, or bodily comportment. Furthermore, video data enable the analyst to consider how the local ecology of objects, artefacts, texts, tools, and technologies feature in and impact the action and activity under scrutiny’ (Heath et al. 2010: 7). Photography was also used for documentation purposes. Additionally, the artist in charge of conducting the art sessions was asked to keep a weekly journal to note any significant occurrences. Some of the key prompts and questions used to guide note taking were:

- Describe the activity and plan for the day.
- How did the session unfold?
- Were there any noteworthy encounters or incidents that affected the art programme?
- What were the participants' responses to the activities/ session?

Both video and journal notes were examined to identify themes. A debriefing session also took place between the art team and ADA staff following the completion of the six-week programme as a way to gather further feedback and improve the programme. Data collected were analysed and interpreted using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), in which the data were initially skimmed to obtain general themes followed by a more focused analysis to explore the relations between various themes.

Ethics and recruitments of participants

This project was reviewed and approved by the Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board (IRB-2014-09-016). Participants of the programme were recruited using purposeful sampling (Marshall 1996), with help from staff at the participating ADA day care centre. Participants were not required to have previous knowledge or experience in art-making to join the programme; all interested persons could apply. Taking into consideration the vulnerable position of participants, informed consent was sought from family members prior to their participation.

Results

Living with dementia can limit patients' opportunities and ability to socialise and participate in meaningful activities. *Let' Have Tea at the Museum* aimed at promoting inclusiveness and combating isolation by providing people living with early or moderate dementia with continued access to meaningful activities and opportunities to thrive. The data analysis involved undertaking reviews of the lead artist's weekly journal and the video recordings from all the six sessions to identify the general themes. When reviewing the videos, attention was given to the participants' expressions, levels of interaction, reactions, and responses to the activities by looking for gestures, behaviours, and conversations. The three themes that emerged from the data, which support the benefits of the programme, include: (1) fostering a space for self-discovery, growth, and socialising; (2) art as resource for multi-sensorial engagement and stimulation; and (3) encouraging play and boosting morale.

Fostering space for self-discovery, growth and socialising through making art

Although participants did not have any experience in art-making, the levels of enthusiasm and engagement among participants were high. Participants demonstrated continued ability to learn new skills and they displayed a wealth of imagination. For example, during the clay art-making sessions, participants applied the basic building and decorative techniques that were introduced to them when creating their assortments of ‘local cakes’. The atmosphere during all of the sessions was lively and energetic; the air was frequently filled with laughter and banter from the unending chats among participants, art facilitators, and volunteers. Participants displayed sustained interest in the creative art activities and the social interactions that occurred during each session.

Participants progressed with their work independently without requiring much verbal prompting from the art facilitators or volunteers. Participants actively took charge of their choice of art materials and ventured out on their own creative journeys. The art-making process also encouraged play and enabled the participant to express their often hidden and unexpressed imaginative world. For example, through the *Collage with Fabric* project, a variety of imagery, such as a quilted blanket, a fish, a house, and a rocket emerged from works. The art-making process and their artwork also stimulated them to share their personal and imaginative stories naturally.

The sharing of artwork also offered another opportunity for interaction. For example, a participant’s rocket-like image stimulated the group to begin a spontaneous and imaginative conversation about travel and destinations. Participants also showed a lot of interest in each other’s work. They listened to their peers’ stories and did not hesitate to contribute their own perspectives to expand the narrative when inspiration struck them. Participants also praised one another’s work. An example of such spontaneous exchange was the delightful remark, ‘That is very beautiful!’ which was made by a participant to a fellow participant as he presented to the group, affirming the quality of the person’s decorated ting-kat.

Figure 1: Collage with fabric artwork by participants and sharing session.

The participants’ attention spans also exceeded staff and facilitators’ expectations. The art team was initially advised to keep the programme under 45 minutes; however, sessions were found to be highly engaging for the participants. In their creative pursuits, they seemed to lose track of time. As a result, sessions often lasted more than 90 minutes.

Art as a resource for multi-sensorial engagement and stimulation

The choice of art materials, objects, and projects were designed to offer participants a multi-sensorial experience to stimulate their tactility, verbal expression, and imagination.

Throughout the programme, participants were exposed to a variety of materials and creative processes. The materials and processes were useful in stimulating participants to share memories they had or to create new ones with their imaginations. For example, in the activity of making traditional ‘goodies’ with paper clay, one participant shared about a festive occasion during which her family gathered to make the goodies. A second participant took a creative spin on the ingredients he had in mind for the ‘filling’ of his traditional cakes. Instead of the conventional glutinous rice filling, he decided his would be filled with curry rice.

Figure 2: The multi-sensorial process and experience offered to participants.

Encouraging play and boosting morale

Despite the participants’ lack of experience in art-making, it seemed that once they got over the initial phase of self-doubt and insecurity about their creative potential, they began to develop a sense of confidence and took pride in their work. Their joy, sense of achievement, and satisfaction were noticeable in their smiling faces and their voices as they shared their artwork.

Seeing is affirming. In seeing their completed artwork, participants often expressed admiration and wonderment about their own creations. The artwork produced by the participants seemed to create an affirming effect for them, boosting their sense of morale. The aesthetics of their works brought about a sense of appreciation and pleasure. It is also through this creative process that participants engaged in a process of play, which can be a well-being resource (Clark 2016). Besides the energising and enlivening qualities, play helps stimulate the brain and promotes socialisation (Brown 2009). Play is a valuable form of stimulation that may tend to overlook, particularly when working with older individuals. In this programme, play, which was encouraged by the creative art projects, offered cognitive stimulation and promoted positive emotions among participants.

Figure 3: Ting-Kat Art by a participant and sharing session.

Figure 4: A participant sharing his Ting-Kat Art with the group.

Discussion

There has been an increasing numbers of arts and cultural initiatives for people living with dementia in recent decades; however, the majority of these contributions have focused largely on practices from the US and UK (Zeilig et al. 2014; Young et al. 2016). Reports on the effects of art-making activities on people living with dementia in Asia, particularly from the South-East Asia, have been scant (Chen et al. 2014). This report provides an example of successful practice from the South-East Asian region and aims to inspire and encourage cultural institutions, artists, and dementia care providers in the region to come together to create a new pathway of caring and a well-being resource for people with dementia.

Collections at the museum informed project themes that led and engaged the participants to trigger earlier life experiences; by linking art-making to reminiscence, the participants tapped in to their latent creative potential and experienced self-discovery and development. The ability to create and realise a piece of artwork can serve as an empowering experience for individuals. The completed art pieces can engender a sense of accomplishment, ownership, pride, and delight. Art-making involves tactility, creation that encourages imaginative play, and provides physical and sensory stimulation. These qualities are limited in reminiscence, which is largely conversation-based. When used with reminiscence, art-making can provide a more extensive range of stimulation and help deepen engagement.

The *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* programme was developed to offer similar benefits to other art-for-dementia programmes reported in the literature (Rentz 2002; Kinney and Rentz 2005; Young et al. 2016). For example, the increased and sustained attention observed among participants during the programme is similar to previous reports on the ability of art-making activities in promoting higher attention spans among people living with dementia (Rentz 2002; Kinney and Rentz 2005). It has been suggested that sustained attention can lead to improvement in other domains of cognition (Posner and Patoine 2009). The spontaneous recollection and sharing of memories stimulated by themes of the art project and the participants' artwork, such as the *Decorative Ting-Kat Art* and *Making traditional "goodies,"* provided unique access to emotional and physical memories (Smith et al. 2012; Eekelaar et al. 2012) and promoted verbal communication (Ullán et al. 2013; Musella et al. 2009). Staff observed and reported that the art-making sessions made the participants livelier and fostered interaction among clients. The staff also noted how the art-making stimulated verbal

communication and appreciated its ability to lead the participants to discover and release their creative abilities and imaginations. This art programme featured a quality not offered in many of the ADA's existing programmes. Encouraged by the results from the pilot, the programme was also requested for implementation at another ADA day care centre. The outcomes of this pilot also led the ADA to explore new art-based programmes involving other art forms, such as photography, as way to enrich the lives of clients.

There is a growing number of art-for-dementia programmes involving museum. However, museum programmes as art-for-dementia that involve participatory art-making opportunities led by an artist have been limited. *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* serves as an engagement programme that imparts art-making skills and supports the participants in creating and realising original artwork. In this way, the leisure and educational qualities of the programme are distinguishable from therapy-based programmes that focuses on using art to treat symptoms or as a tool to assess one's condition (Castora-Binkley et al. 2010; Eekelaar et al. 2012).

Existing art-for-dementia programmes reported in the art health literature have largely focused on viewing and engaging the participants in discussions about the exhibits led by trained museum staff (Young et al. 2015; Johnson et al. 2015; Rosenberg 2009). The *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* programme offered a unique approach that combines art-making with reminiscence that enabled the participants to further explore the connection that the exhibits have with their own memories and experiences; the programme also encouraged creation and expression. The collection of household objects, artefacts, and dioramas of everyday life at the Peranakan Museum were found to be relatable to the participants and were useful for stimulating and encouraging spontaneous conversations. The use of selected artefacts and motifs from the museum collection into the art projects also provided continuity of topics that encouraged spontaneous recollection and imagination.

Conclusion and recommendation

Living does not cease when dementia begins. By creating spaces for people living with dementia to access meaningful activities, it is possible to enable them to continue enjoying a good quality of life. *Let's Have Tea at the Museum* has exemplified the ability of participatory art to create a space of self-discovery, growth, and socialisation for people living with dementia. Participatory art activities can offer meaningful opportunities for individuals and help enrich the lives of people living dementia. Through the multi-sensorial experiences, the programme also encouraged imaginative play and socialisation among participants. Further,

through these activities and processes, participants benefited from the social exchanges and positive emotions, such as sense of achievement and the pleasure gained from their creations. The sustained attention displayed by participants indicated a high level of interest and participation. This finding supports the potential and suitability of the programme to be implemented in other dementia day care centres for clients with early stage dementia who have no prior experience with art-making.

Figure 5: Exhibition and celebration at the end of the Six-week programme.

As a recommendation, future studies could incorporate interviews with participants to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and feelings about the programme. Interviews can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact from the programme as well. Additionally, participant feedback can also be sought to help identify aspects of the programme that can be improved to better suit their needs. Due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, the small sample size and methods of analysis did present a limitation in terms of evaluating and generalising the effects of the programme. Despite these limitations, the positive experiences of the participants from this study indicated potential for art-making to support and enrich the lives of people with dementia. Such investigations can also benefit from using a mixed-methods approach that also include quantitative analysis of the video data to examine the frequency of a predefined set of social, interactive, and affective behaviours, which may offer further insights and a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of arts engagement for people living with dementia. Additionally, as a practical suggestion for the art team, the team can also make use of the exhibition at the end of the programme to provide an art tester session for other clients at the centre. This approach can be useful for encouraging more clients to participate in the programme.

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